



Leaked State Dept Benghazi e-mails might have been wrong

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Obama administration officials and outside experts believe that the Sept. 11 e-mails sent by the State Department's operations center referring to claims of responsibility by an extremist group might have been wrong, especially since that group denied responsibility the next day.

On Wednesday, several outlets reported that emails sent on the night of the attack from the State Department operations center to administration officials described the assault as it was in progress and noted that the extremist group Ansar al-Sharia had claimed responsibility on Facebook and Twitter.

The first email, sent on Sept. 11 at 4:05 p.m. Washington time, reported that 20 armed men had fired on the compound, that explosions were heard, and that Amb. Christopher Stevens and three other personnel were in the compound safe haven. The second email at 4:54 stated that the shooting had stopped. The third email said that Ansar al-Sharia had claimed credit on Facebook and Twitter.

But the official Facebook and Twitter pages of the Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi chapter showed no such Facebook posting on the night of Sept. 11, only a posting the next day denying that the group had been responsible for the attack, according to Aaron Zelin, an expert who monitors jihadist websites. The group's official Facebook page was taken down in the days after the attack but its official Twitter feed is still active, though the most recent tweet was on Sept. 14.

The group also posted on Facebook and Twitter a YouTube video on Sept. 12 praising the attack but emphasizing that it was not organized or officially led by Ansar al Sharia. The video leaves open the possibility that individual members of the group may have been involved in the attack.

"We commend the Libyan Muslim people in Benghazi [that were] against the attack on the [Muslim] Prophet [Muhammad]," a summary of the video states. "Katibat Ansar al-Sharia [in Benghazi] as a military did not participate formally/officially and not by direct orders."

Zelin, a researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, captured screenshots of the Facebook page, and said they suggest that the State Department operations center got it wrong when it emailed officials saying the group had claimed responsibility.

"Based on the original reaction from Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi (ASB), the language would suggest that the attack was not planned by the senior leadership, but rather members in an individual capacity were involved," Zelin told The Cable in an email. "Further, because this video statement was not posted until 7AM EST on the 12th on ASB's official Facebook page and Twitter account, it calls into question the leaked emails, which stated there was a statement claiming responsibility the night of the attack. It is possible staffers were mistaken in the heat of the moment. Not only was there no statement from ASB until the following morning, but it did not claim responsibility."

The group also released an official statement on Sept. 12 along the same lines, stating that the attack was not an official operation, as noted by Bill Roggio of the Long War Journal.

"Ansar al-Shariah Brigade didn't participate in this popular uprising as a separate entity, but it was carrying out its duties in al-Jala'a hospital and other places where it was entrusted with some duties. The Brigade didn't participate as a sole entity; rather, it was a spontaneous popular uprising in response to what happened by the West," the statement said.

Also on Sept. 12, a spokesman for Ansar al-Sharia praised the attack and said, according to the New York Times, "We are saluting our people for this zeal in protecting their religion, to grant victory to the prophet. The response has to be firm."

A senior State Department official told The Cable that the State Department operations center heard about the alleged Sept. 11 Facebook posting claiming responsibility secondhand, from the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli. The State Department hasn't determined whether the ops center email

was correct or not, and either way, such emails are just spot reports and are not considered intelligence products.

"Whatever claim of responsibility that was issued that first night was withdrawn soon after by the Sept. 12 statements," the official said. "While some are interpreting it otherwise, this more than anything speaks to the fluidity of information that night and the days that followed."

The White House has refused to comment on which officials received the emails or when.

Pressed Wednesday to explain how the State Department ops center emails could be reconciled with official claims in the days after that there was no evidence the attack was "pre-planned," White House Press Secretary Jay Carney referred to the Sept. 12 statements from Ansar al-Sharia disavowing responsibility.

"This was an open-source, unclassified email about a posting on a Facebook site. I would also note I think that within a few hours, that organization itself claimed that it had not been responsible. Neither should be taken as fact. That's why there's an investigation underway," Carney said.

Three Republican senators — Sens. John McCain (R-AZ), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) — nonetheless sent a letter Wednesday to President Barack Obama demanding an explanation as to how the new reports reconcile with administration accounts of the attack at the time and since.

"These emails make clear that your Administration knew within two hours of the attack that it was a terrorist act and that Ansar al-Sharia, a Libyan militant group with links to Al-Qaeda, had claimed responsibility for it. This latest revelation only adds to the confusion surrounding what you and your Administration knew about the attacks in Benghazi, when you knew it, and why you responded to those tragic events in the ways that you did," they wrote.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Wednesday criticized the idea that the State Department ops center emails or the alleged Facebook posting they mentioned could be definitive in any way.

"Posting something on Facebook is not in and of itself evidence, and I think it just underscores how fluid the reporting was at the time and continued for some time to be," Clinton said. "What I keep in mind is that four brave Americans were killed, and we will find out what happened, we will take whatever measures are necessary to fix anything that needs to be fixed, and we will bring those to justice who committed these murders. And I think that that is what we have said, that is what we are doing, and I'm very confident that we will achieve those goals."

UPDATE: After House Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-CA) sent a letter to the president today based on the State Department e-mails, his Democratic counterpart Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-MD) issued a statement criticizing Issa for not mentioning that the content of the e-mails was in dispute.

Over and over again, Republicans have launched partisan accusations based on limited and inaccurate information, and in this case Chairman Issa disregarded conflicting reports that Ansar al-Sharia disavowed responsibility for the attack less than 24 hours later," said Cummings. "It's time to stop shamelessly politicizing this tragedy and let the independent investigation complete its work without interference."